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ABSTRACT

Although instructional leadership is acknowledged to be a critical skill in educational administration, few principals and superintendents have had in-depth training for that role, especially in a standards-based environment. Current definitions of instructional leadership include much deeper involvement in the "core technology" of teaching and learning, carry more sophisticated views of professional development, and emphasize the use of data to make decisions, in comparison to the definitions of the 1980s. Leadership is also distributed across the school community, with principals, superintendents, teachers, and policymakers having complementary responsibilities. Leadership preparation programs include cohort programs, case studies, problem-based learning, and internships. School districts can build instructional leadership by expecting all employees to be both teachers and learners. A key strategy in New York City's District Two is the "WalkThrough" program. It begins with a meeting to review goals and objectives, analyze test data (including discussions of individual children), and discuss teacher performance. The meeting is followed by a visit to every classroom, which involves interaction with teachers and students, and concludes with an evaluation meeting. The WalkThroughs are both supervisory, underscoring the principal's accountability, and supportive, providing the occasion for dialogue and coaching. (Contains 13 references.) (RT)

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Developing Instructional Leaders

By Larry Lashway

Significant educational ideas endure, but they also evolve over time. In the 1980s, "instructional leadership" became the dominant paradigm for school leaders after researchers noticed that effective schools usually had principals who kept a high focus on curriculum and instruction. In the first half of the 1990s, attention to instructional leadership seemed to waver, displaced by discussions of school-based management and facilitative leadership.

But recently instruction has surged back to the top of the leadership agenda, driven by the relentless growth of standards-based accountability systems. Explicit standards of learning, coupled with heavy pressure to provide tangible evidence of success, have reaffirmed the importance of instructional leadership.

Nevertheless, despite general agreement that instructional leadership is a critical skill, few principals and superintendents have had indepth training for that role, especially in a standards-based environment. This Digest reviews the demands of today's instructional leadership and discusses steps that universities and school districts can take to help leaders develop the necessary skills.

How Is Today's Instructional Leadership Defined?

Current definitions of *instructional leadership* are richer and more expansive than those of the 1980s. Originally, the role involved traditional tasks such as setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. Today, it includes much deeper involvement in the "core technology" of teaching and learning, carries more sophisticated views of professional development, and emphasizes the use of data to make decisions (Deborah King 2002). Attention has shifted from teaching to learning, and some now prefer the term "learning leader" over "instructional leader" (Richard DuFour 2002).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) frames instructional leadership in terms of "leading learning communities." In NAESP's view, instructional leaders have six roles: making student and adult learning the priority; setting high expectations for performance; gearing content and instruction to standards; creating a culture of continuous learning for adults; using multiple sources of data to assess learning; and activating the community's support for school success.

These sweeping goals reflect a "best-practices" perspective distilled from an analysis of the current demands being placed on schools. We know much less about how—or how much—principals actually carry out these functions on a daily basis (James Spillane and colleagues 2000). The leader's day is built around dozens of concrete "micro tasks," many of which have no overt connection with instruction. How do principals weave these mundane daily activities into a learning-focused agenda?

Joseph and Jo Blase (2000) provided a partial answer by asking teachers to describe the behaviors of principals who had a positive influence on student learning. Two broad themes emerged: talking with teachers and promoting professional development. These were expressed in specific behaviors such as making suggestions, giving feedback, modeling effective instruction, soliciting opinions, supporting collaboration, providing professional development opportunities, and giving praise for effective teaching. All these actions were carried out in a way that respected teacher knowledge and autonomy.

How Is Instructional Leadership Distributed?

Instructional leadership of the 1980s was principal-centered, often accompanied by images of heroic leaders single-handedly keeping the school on track. Many recent policy documents continue to put principals front and center; for example, Gene Bottoms and Kathy O'Neill (2001) characterize the principal as the "chief learning officer" who bears "ultimate responsibility for success or failure of the enterprise."

However, a growing number of researchers say that instructional leadership is *distributed* across the school community, with principals, superintendents, teachers, and policymakers having complementary responsibilities (King; Richard Elmore 2000; Spillane and colleagues).

Elmore identifies five key players in reform: (1) policymakers, whose responsibility is synthesizing diverse political interests into a viable system; (2) researchers and program developers, whose responsibility is identifying and creating successful strategies and structures; (3) superintendents and central office staff, whose responsibility is framing coherent district-wide goals and support systems; (4) principals, whose responsibility is designing and implementing a well-focused school improvement plan; and (5) teachers, whose responsibility is translating curriculum into meaningful learning experiences for students. Elmore says that each role leads to a different kind of expertise that leaders must both respect and cultivate.

Distributed leadership does not imply a simple division of labor, with participants playing their designated roles in isolation from the others. Instead, their efforts are interdependent, frequently spanning boundaries (Spillane and colleagues). For example, principals can arrange professional development opportunities, but teachers must actually apply the new ideas in the classroom.

What Do Administrators Need To Know About Instructional Leadership?

Standards-based accountability challenges traditional assumptions about instructional leadership. Instead of encouraging teachers' efforts, principals now must lead teachers to produce tangible results on ambitious academic standards. This requires not just innovative practices, but a different mindset (Elmore; Kate Jamemtz 2002).

Several implications are apparent. First, given the numerous and often conflicting demands for reform, leaders must create coherence in improvement efforts (Jonathan Supovitz and Susan Poglinco 2001). This is sometimes expressed as "vision," but more prosaically it just means that all players understand there is a common goal to which everyone is accountable and that policies, practices, and resources are aligned with the goal. Instructional leadership is the "organizational glue" that keeps things on track (Elmore).

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Second, the distributed nature of leadership requires administrators to achieve a finely tuned balance of mandate and empowerment. On the one hand, they must make it clear that change is not optional, and that common goals may require teachers to give up or defer some individual preferences. On the other hand, they cannot simply impose the goal. Effective instructional leaders create a safe environment for teachers, using dialogue rather than dictates to keep the focus on core instructional issues (Supovitz and Poglinco).

Finally, leaders must model learning. Jamentz notes that principals must be able to recognize whether lessons are aligned with standards, develop classroom assessments consistent with standards, and evaluate student work for evidence that standards have been achieved. Their knowledge should be deep enough to let them coach teachers using explanations, practical examples, and demonstration lessons. Just as important, leaders must demonstrate the same learning traits that they expect in teachers: openness to new ideas, willingness to be driven by results, and persistence in the face of difficulty.

How Do Preparation Programs Develop Instructional Leaders?

Success in standards-based reform clearly requires sophisticated skills, exerting pressure on preparation programs to sharpen their focus on instructional leadership. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has responded with new performance-based standards based on the assumption that "the purpose of leadership is to improve teaching and learning." Administrator preparation programs must prove that their students can develop a vision, design comprehensive professional growth plans, provide effective instructional programs, and apply best practices to student learning (National Policy Board for Educational Administration 2002).

Programs have just begun to implement these standards, and many are not affiliated with NCATE. Although most programs undoubtedly address instructional leadership, there is little evidence at this point that students gain indepth knowledge of the core technology of teaching and learning.

Reforms described by Ann Weaver Hart and Diana Pounder (1999) hold out promise for improving training for instructional leadership. *Cohort programs*, in which students go through the program with the same group of peers, can provide a meaningful laboratory for developing collaborative skills. *Case studies* and *problem-based learning* offer lifelike simulations that hone students' thinking about complex instructional issues. Extended *internships* can give students experience in making changes in field settings.

Finally, Theodore Creighton and Gary Jones (2001) point out that few programs currently look beyond grade-point average when recruiting students into programs. They suggest that using behavioral-based criteria such as assessment center exercises would provide better insights into candidates' ability to handle the demands of instructional leadership.

How Do Districts Develop Instructional Leadership?

Earlier images of heroic principals may have encouraged many districts to seek instructional leadership by hiring exemplary candidates with all the right traits (Elmore). But heroes are in short supply, and research suggests that the district's organizational culture can either develop or squelch learning-focused leaders.

Districts can build instructional leadership by expecting all employees to be both teachers and learners. Elaine Fink and Lauren Resnick (1999) have described how New York City's District Two expects central-office staff to provide models of learning for principals. Monthly conferences invariably focus in depth on instructional issues, including examination of test results to cast light on instructional issues. In addition, principals are expected to attend a number of special-topic institutes during the year.

The deputy superintendent conducts support groups for new principals, who are encouraged to air instructional problems they are grappling with, and similar groups are established for principals of schools with large numbers of at-risk students. The district also encourages principals to visit each other's buildings to observe specific practices or simply do informal "buddying" on selected issues.

A key strategy is the supervisory "Walk Through" of each school. It begins with a meeting to review goals and objectives, analyze test data (including discussions of individual children), and discuss the performance of teachers. This is followed by a visit to every classroom, involving interaction with students and teachers, and is concluded with an evaluation meeting. The Walk Throughs are both supervisory (underscoring the principal's accountability) and supportive (providing the occasion for dialogue and coaching).

Through these activities, the district sends a clear message: learning is *everyone's* responsibility.

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